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ABSTRACT

In "creative listening" sessions, participants alternately present their ideas (for fixed periods of time) and listen silently to the other participants. This paper examines the value of this method as an aid to problem solving and offers suggestions for teachers serving as mediators and participants in creative listening sessions. It describes how teachers mediated creative listening sessions that helped to resolve racial and religious differences between two groups of students at an elementary/secondary school, and how a teacher participated in a creative listening session to help a 12-year-old boy solve his school-related problems. (GW)

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CREATIVE LISTENING:

A TECHNIQUE TO IMPROVE INTER-PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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School teachers, ask yourselves these questions. Then read how a specialist suggests practical ways of remedying the situation.

Can a conversation between two people holding opposite views be effective?

Do such discussions result in any positive action on the part of these two people?

Does mere talk help to create an awareness of and sensitivity to the inner feelings of others?

No, says Dr. Rachel Pinney. Very often not. An English physician and psychotherapist, Doctor Pinney has found that the answers to these vital questions are too often "No".

In fact, she has observed that an average listener is usally too busy preparing his next remark to pay any real attention to the speaker. Consequently, there is much conversation, little communication. The chore of simultaneously listening to an incoming idea and assessing it seems to be too great for most people.

So engrossed in these and other problems of personal communication has Doctor Pinney become that she has given up her medical practice in Chelsea, England. Now she devotes all her time to developing and promoting a technique which she calls Creative Listening.

Several methods have been devised by Doctor Pinney to meet the needs of a variety of communication situations. These techniques are to be found in a pamphlet published in March 1968 and entitled "Creative Listening." All the methods share a common element in that they are designed to help the individual pay full attention to his job as speaker or listener.

One of these methods, for instance, can easily be adapted to school settings. The procedure in this is simple. The two conflicting individuals or groups are brought together. Agreement is reached as to who talks first. Perhaps a neutral observer spins a coin. The first party talks. He presents his case or problem in any manner he wishes, for as long as he wishes. The other party empties his mind of preconceived notions and tries to identify sympathetically with the speaker. He may not be very successful at first, but he can listen because he doesn't have to formulate a reply. When his turn comes, he presents his own view point. Now the first speaker listens. No interruptions are allowed.

When both participants become aware that they aren't required to play a dual role, a new level of communication develops. They begin to communicate creatively. For now the listener is released into a relaxed state that will call forth constructive awareness. Freed from the urge to make instant replies, as he relaxes he concentrates on grasping the speaker's message. Aware in turn of the listener's attention, the speaker becomes less aggressive. He

no longer needs to maintain that dogmatic facade; he may even be able to share any doubts he may have about his own views.

Finally, in this easy atmosphere of exchange, both sides talk themselves out. Now they may discover areas of agreement, either on the main point of conflict or on some side issue. In any event, a channel of sympathetic communication has been opened.

Any teacher wishing to introduce this technique to his students must find a way of leading to it which isn't self-concious. For example, the English teacher may incorporate a description of Creative Listening into some oral work. If the teacher conducts class debates, he/she can also discuss Creative Listening as a contrasting method of communication. This will fit in especially where the standard of debate is sharp and sophisticated. For already his/her class has learned that debate does not always settle issues.

In a drama program, he/she can discuss drama as a communication of feelings and then lead into the problem of conveying feelings without acting.

In the social studies area, the teacher will be able to contrast Creative Listening procedures with parliamentary procedures. While introducing the idea, the teacher must stress three basic points: first, that all parties involved must be free to express ideas within the normal bounds of good taste and consideration for others; second, that participants must try to be honest both in their communication and in their effort to identify with each other; and third, that they must agree in advance upon the confidential nature of what they're discussing.

As a matter of fact, the teacher can play one of two roles in a Creative Listening situation. One involves introducing the technique, bringing the parties together and overseeing the technique until the pupils are able to manage it for themselves. This approach can be used with two students only or with two groups of students who have come into conflict. The junior author has seen an instance of its application in an all-grades Roman Catholic school in Northern Alberta, Canada.

At the request of parents, some Lutheran and Anglican pupils had also been admitted to this school. Around Hallowe'en the usual prank among the various groups led to conflict. The clashing slipped verbally into the classroom and began to take on racial and religious overtones.

Three leaders from each group with one girl on each side, agreed to try Creative Listening to solve the problem. Neither side showed real prejudice, but each

side had used name-calling to annoy and tease the other. At the same time everyone noted the lack of recreational facilities in the town. And one area of jealousy centered around a religious group that the Catholic students belonged to.

Finally, as a result of the period of Creative Listening, the young people came to terms. The Catholics agreed to ask the priest and the vice-principal to separate the social and religious activities of their group. Then the social activities were to be open to any young person who agreed to behave in an acceptable way. Meantime everyone was to make an effort to understand the various religious customs of the community.

The authorities agreed to the students' request. The school gym was opened each Sunday evening for games such as badminton and ping-pong. Soon, on their own accord, students began to develop a wider range of activities.

Arrangements were also made for the students to visit each church in the town. The ministers, too came to the classrooms, both separately and together, and during the Religious Instruction period, they explained their faiths and answered questions.

There are times, too, when the teacher meets success by placing himself/herself in a Creative Listening situation with an individual student. Here the same basic rules apply. The teacher has no special privileges. He/she must concentrate on listening, thereby achieving a deeper level of communication with the student. The example of Lloyd indicates how valuable is this therapy for the student.

Lloyd, age 12, I.Q. 115, was extremely restless in class. Though able to do his work, he never completed anything. His appearance, his desk, and his workbooks were most untidy. He was on poor terms with the other boys in the class.

During Creative Listening sessions he broke into tears, sobbing that he couldn't make friends because nobody lived anywhere near him. His father seemed to be excessively harsh, especially about report card grades. Mother always sided with Father, even when she had previously agreed to support Lloyd. Though he was interested in science, the boy was bored with other school work.

Being able to talk openly about his problems seemed, in itself, to be of some help. He agreed to undertake independent science projects to be worked on at any time in class after he had completed the minimum assignments in other subjects. He was allowed to choose his own projects so long as they could be in some way related to the syllabus. He began to handle them in depth, presenting his findings to the class in regular science periods. Though the lad's father continued to be less than reasonable about grading, discussion with him also cleared up some misunderstandings.

As Lloyd's class work improved, so did his behavior. While he still continued to be tense, and to have trouble in his relationships with other boys, he began to adjust his attitude to his situation. Gradually life grew more tolerable for him.

Such examples show the teacher as mediator or participant. The success of the technique depends on the way the teacher plays these roles. In the initial stages, supervision of the mechanics of the session is the teacher's responsibility. He should see that a comfortable interruption-free atmosphere is attained. (If time is limited, the teacher should establish a cut-off point in advance.) The available time should be divided equally, so that both parties have at least two chances to speak. For example, if a session has to be discontinued after one hour, the time could be split into four fifteen-minute periods or six ten-minute periods. A stop-watch or clock can be placed where everyone can see it. Of course, the session will be more successful if there are limitations placed upon time. When a session has to be closed, the teacher takes the initiative in arranging the next meeting.

When acting as mediator, the teacher draws only on ideas presented by the students taking part. His efforts are more profitably spent in gathering together the views he hears than in attempting to impose his own solution. Agreement has to be mutually acceptable in order to be effective.

Only when the final decision contains the seeds of future discord should the teacher interfere. For instance, two pople can easily settle a disagreement by directing an aggression against someone else; or the proposed solution could conflict with policies of school or community. In such cases the teacher then applies a veto and starts a search for a more acceptable solution.

However, the teacher should take care not to dominate the session. Direction should be kept to the bare minimum required for a smooth exchange of ideas. Unless the occasion absolutely demands guidance, the teacher should suppress the urge to impose his own moral values. They are probably irrelevant to the student anyway. Displays of shock, surprise, or disgust by the teacher reduce the chances of continuing communication. The student is probably trying to test the teacher's good faith. If the student has a problem, a hostile reaction will not help to solve it. The teacher's concern is to help modify the problem, not to condemn the student.

Creative Listening sessions are valuable aids to problem solving and counseling. Clarification of the issues alters attitudes: conflicts become amenable to reconciliation. Frank discussion leads to successful positive action. Perhaps most important, participants grow increasingly aware of each other as sensitive human beings.